

The Unknown Soldiers

Revolutionary War heroes rest in Ellis Woods



Places
Ellis Woods Cemetery

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Special to the Local News

EAST COVENTRY — History details the bitter winter of 1777-78 when General George Washington and his troops unbelievably withstood the deplorable conditions at Valley Forge and somehow survived.

But many of Washington's soldiers, wounded in the Battle of Brandywine or who suffered from pneumonia and other maladies, never reached Valley Forge. Ellis Woods Revolutionary War Cemetery, on a small hill in East Coventry, serves as a final resting place for many soldiers who succumbed to their injuries that winter.

It remains unknown exactly how many soldiers are buried in and around the burial ground. Chester County had become key to the British plans to take Philadelphia. Strategists targeted the county as an easy access to the city, aware that Mennonites and Quakers would offer no resistance.

After the Battle of Brandywine, Washington and his army retreated northward through Chester County, attempting to protect Warwick Furnace. Of particular strategic significance, the Furnace was used for the production of cannon balls.

According to Harvey Kulp of the East Coventry Historical Society, hundreds of men worked round the clock to maintain adequate production of the ammunition. From Warwick, Washington proceeded toward Valley Forge,



Wayne Fulton, a member of the Veterans of Foreign Wars, stands outside the entrance to the Ellis Woods Cemetery where several Revolutionary War soldiers are buried.

planning to cross the Schuylkill River at Pottsgrove. But high water levels prohibited crossing at that site, routing Washington and his troops to Parkerford, where they crossed the river.

As the troops made their way across the northern part of the county, many sick and suffering men were offered shelter in houses, barns, and sheds near Ellis Woods and received assistance from local farmers.

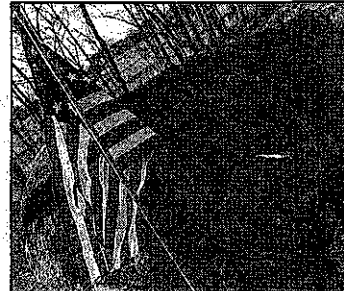
Some of the soldiers died and were

buried within the graveyard designated for that purpose. Seventeen graves are marked, but local lore suggests that as many as 150 bodies were buried in the surrounding woods.

Kulp, a knowledgeable octogenarian, recalls stories handed down through several generations of soldiers' remains buried in the surrounding area. Washington, the war tactician, was reluctant to permit the exact losses to be ascertained by marking and enumerating graves.

Subsequent road widening and improvements have turned up additional remains, along with buttons that likely adorned Revolutionary War uniforms, supporting the belief that many soldiers lie in areas throughout the woods.

During the Civil War, the property on which the graveyard lies was occupied by John Ellis. Ellis offered his farm as a station in the Underground Railroad, the network of sites that assisted in leading slaves north to freedom in



Canada. Many slaves made the stop in East Coventry on their escape route.

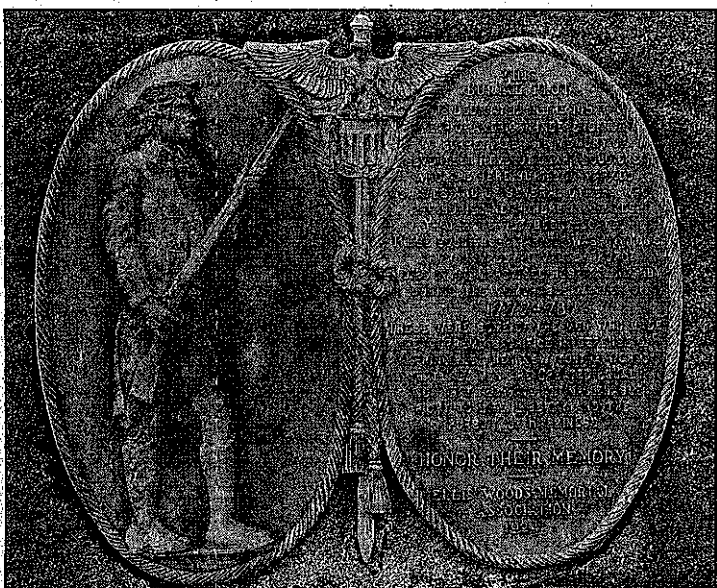
Ellis, while aware of the existence of the graves, paid little attention to them. But after the Civil War, his daughter and another little girl in his care placed flowers on the graves. For the two youngsters, it became an annual ritual. Members of the Grand Army who heard of the girls' patriotic gestures later decided to denote each grave with a GAR flag holder.

Efforts by the members to secure government markers for each grave failed since they were unable to provide the names of soldiers buried there. Ellis allowed GAR members to decorate the graves; however, he permitted no memorial services.

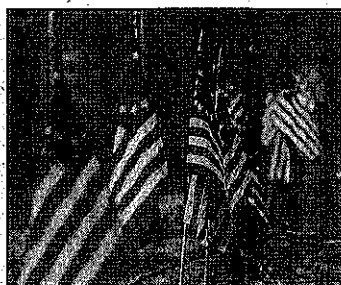
But after ownership of the Ellis farm changed, annual memorial services were conducted. By 1920, the GAR permitted the U.S. Spanish War Veterans of Pottstown to join in the commemoration of the unknown Revolutionary soldiers.

The U.S. Spanish War Veterans maintained total responsibility for the cemetery in 1922, when the location of a sawmill nearby threatened destruction or desecration of the graves. The group organized the Ellis Woods Memorial Association which, along with other local organizations, schools, and private citizens, purchased the part of the woods where the graves are located.

The cemetery is now maintained by the Joint Veterans Council of Pottstown. Veterans conduct a special annual memorial service on the Sunday before Memorial Day. This year's commemoration, which will be held at 2 p.m., features a speaker and 60-piece concert band.



The plaque above was erected in memory of the many Revolutionary War soldiers who are buried at the Ellis Woods Cemetery.



Above, flags grace the cemetery where Revolutionary War soldiers are buried. At right, Wayne Fulton reads one of the marker's honoring one of the soldiers.

